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ABSTRACT

A summary of the state of English language instruction in Belgium outlines the role and status of English usage in that country; English instruction at 11 levels of the instructional system, including elementary and secondary education in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, university instruction, examinations, and correspondence courses; English teachers' status, associations, and regulation; materials support; educational administration in relation to English teaching; the development and planning of English instruction; English outside the educational system; British, American,and other agency support of English instruction; commercial opportunities; creative writing; current research; and sources of further information. It is concluded that the complexity of the Belgian political and linguistic situation is reflected in the highly segmented educational system, and that while English is gaining in importance within the systems, the need for instruction in the two native languages continues to have priority. (MSE)

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ENGLISH TEACHING PROFILE

Country: Belgium

Date: March 1985

1. ROLE AND STATUS OF ENGLISH

Belgium is divided into two major regions: Flanders (Dutch-speaking) and Wallonia (French-speaking). The Brussels agglomeration is bilingual in that French and Dutch are both official languages; street names are in both languages and shops and all public servants have to be able to deal with customers and clients from both linguistic communities. Southwards along the German frontier is a German-speaking community. In the frontier regions, complex arrangements exist for the protection of the educational rights of linguistic minorities.

According to language laws both in the Brussels area and in the regions with protected minorities English can only be taught as a third language. As the headquarters of many English-using multinational enterprises, including the European Commission, the European Parliament, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe), are in Belgium, English and American are frequently heard in these commercial, political and military arenas as well as in Brussels itself and its pleasanter suburbs.

Commercial enterprises often find it necessary to provide further language training for their employees. English is important in the language-teaching programme of the European Commission, where over 1,200 employees study languages for up to three hours a week.

Private language schools provide lessons in English for adults usually in small groups. Free English classes are provided by state schools, county council schools (provinciaal), municipal (gemeentelijk) and denominational schools. Classes are split if numbers rise consistently above thirty-one. In some free adult local authority evening classes numbers are higher at the

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beginning of the year and dwindle rapidly - as in Britain - as initial enthusiasm wanes. None of the private schools has a parent body in Britain. The British and Belgian Chambers of Commerce in Belgium also run language classes. If these are recognized after inspection by state inspectors they are subsidized. There is some obligation on employers to release employees for classes.

In face of the requirement for many Belgians, particularly those working in the capital, to be bilingual in Dutch and French, the level of attainment in English often encountered betokens strong motivation.

There is a flourishing trade in English books in Belgium; this is directed mainly at expatriates, university staff and students. Mark-up is not great and the selection is good. Antwerp is particularly well provided with book-shops. There are many translators of modern novels into both French and Dutch though the Dutch-speaking community will more easily read books in the original. New titles are reviewed in the quality newspapers and British authors, poets and playwrights visiting Belgium are frequently interviewed by Belgian radio and television (TV) which operate in many cases through free-lance contributors who may be academics.

Since the winter of 1983-4 BBC TV is available on cable in Brussels and may be made available to other areas, though the higher licence fees involved cause disputes as to whether or not communities really want this extra service. They already have four Belgian stations, three French, two German, two Dutch and Luxembourg. ITV and Channel 4 can be received on aerial on the Belgian coast. BBC Radio 4 programmes are received in many areas and the World Service is available throughout Belgium. Reception of other Home Service stations is weaker and more local. For teachers of English, however, there is valuable exposure to British topical, cultural and entertainment programmes from which they and their better pupils can benefit if they wish.

2. ENGLISH WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Since 1970 both Flanders and Wallonia have had a Ministry of Education, with its own Minister. (Both Ministers, Mr Coens and Mr Bertouille, have visited Britain.) Since 1983 secondary education has been compulsory from eleven to fifteen and part-time education is compulsory until eighteen.

School Level

English in Flanders. English is not taught in primary schools.

At secondary level a first foreign language is compulsory from the first year of the lower secondary cycle. In Flanders state schools French and English have been taught from the first year since September 1984. In the 'reformed' system, introduced in 1969, a second and third language can be added subsequently. In other Flemish schools outside the Brussels area, parents are free to choose either French or English as a first foreign language from the first year of secondary education.

In the third year pupils can choose which is to be their second and which their third language for the remainder of their studies. Both languages initially are taught for three hours a week and this may increase or decrease according to the subjects that the student eventually chooses. In technical

schools English is usually taught from the age of fourteen, but for only two periods a week.

English in Wallonia. English is not taught in state primary schools. It is taught in some primary schools run by the City of Liège and a few other local authorities. The City of Brussels is hoping to introduce a pilot scheme for English in some of its primary schools in 1986.

At secondary level a foreign language is compulsory from the first year of lower secondary school. In Wallonia this can be Dutch or English. In spite of political pressures many choose English. Second and third languages can be added in subsequent years and up to two or four hours' tuition a week is provided, depending on the objective.

English in Brussels. English must be the second foreign language in bilingual Brussels (and in the linguistic frontier areas) as the first foreign language taught in Brussels secondary schools must be the other national language. Third and fourth languages can be added in subsequent years. In Brussels a second language may now be taught for two hours a week from the second year of primary school. This covers only the spoken language. Students over fourteen in technical schools may also have only two periods a week of English.

English Literature. There is no systematic study of English literature in schools, though samples may be introduced into language lessons. The top classes of the more academic schools do, however, tackle whole texts, usually poems and modern novels.

University Level

English holds a predominant place in undergraduate language study. Francophone students are reported as reading 25 per cent of scientific literature in a language other than their own.

Among university staff, the newspaper Le Soir reports that 79 per cent of francophones and 90 per cent of the Flemish speakers have published work in English.

Every university in Belgium has an English section within its Department of Germanic languages. The University of Liège English section received permission in 1984 to have a specialized Commonwealth Literature Centre. Liège also teaches medieval language and literature and Professor Derolez in Ghent teaches Anglo-Saxon and old English. Otherwise English departments concentrate on post-Chaucerian English. Because of the democratic right of entry to all forms of tertiary education, including the universities, by all who hold a school-leaving certificate at eighteen years of age, first-year classes at universities and translators' schools tend to be very large, 100 to 200 students. End-of-year examinations weed these numbers down to more manageable groups and third-year classes will be of normal British size - around twenty-five pupils or less in specialized fields.

At university level each department chooses its own literature syllabus. All include Shakespeare and nineteenth-century novels and poetry. Otherwise choices reflect current fashion and the literary tastes of the current head of the department.

Examinations

There are no public examinations either at school or university level. Continuous assessment in schools with twice-yearly examinations every year, supplemented by short tests where the individual teacher sees fit to require them, enable a picture to be built up on the strength of which a school-leaving certificate is issued. Those in possession of this certificate, who wish to do so, may enrol for first-year university studies for interpreters and translators and other forms of higher education.

Absence of evidence of a good command of both the national languages excludes candidates from public service posts. At present this seriously affects the job prospects of Wallonians who have not mastered Dutch. Private industry and commerce usually require employees to have both national languages together with a command at least of English for the more responsible posts at secretarial to managerial levels.

British examinations - the Cambridge First Certificate and Certificate of Proficiency - are offered by a small number of Brussels private language schools. GCE examinations are taken by pupils at the numerous international schools catering for the large expatriate populations of Belgium.

Correspondence Courses

Though Belgium is a small country, state correspondence courses thrive, particularly for adults who are unemployed and wish to use their time profitably to gain another qualification. Some correspondence courses are provided free by the State.

There is an Open University in Brussels; at first it was on the British Council premises but since 1983 it has had its own premises. It may eventually give an impetus to distance learning.

3. TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

Teachers of languages are trained either at a teacher training college, called Institut Supérieur de Pédagogie (formerly école normale/normaalschool), or at a university. Those trained at the first are called régents/regenten and are qualified to teach pupils between twelve and fourteen. University graduates (licenciés-agrégés/licenciaaten) teach at the higher levels. Since 1984 teacher training college courses have been extended from two years to three years. University courses last four years. Very little opportunity for practical teaching and expression exists - a fortnight generally being the maximum time for teaching practice.

Teachers Associations

There are three professional organizations for English teachers:

The Flemish Association for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (FATEFL or VVL under its Flemish initials) which is very lively under an energetic Chairman, Mr Ray Janssens.

The English Teachers Association, Brussels, is a small but lively group of mixed Belgian and native-speaker teachers of English, most of the native-speakers coming from commercial schools.

The Inspectorate - Association des Germanistes diplômés de l'Université de Liège whose members are teachers of English and/or Dutch and/or German. There are three state inspectors for English in Brabant and Flanders and seven in Wallonia: four licenciés-agrégés mostly concerned with the upper grades, three régents solely concerned with the first three years of secondary education. In addition there are a dozen Catholic inspectors for the larger percentage of private schools but these have to combine teaching duties with inspection and have little time to organize any in-service training. The state inspectorates, however, with very limited budgets, do their best to provide in-service training for their teachers and to have them released during school days for this training. Their efforts are supplemented by the university departments at Antwerp and Liège, both of which attempt to provide seminars and lectures for teachers within reasonable geographical distance who are able to attend in their free time.

The responsibilities of inspectors are divided on a geographical basis. Inspectors of English are normally inspectors of all three Germanic languages, Dutch, German and English. The geographical areas are:

In the north - West Flanders and part of Brabant,
- East Flanders and part of Antwerp,
- Antwerp (part), Turnhout, Limburg and the military schools over the border in Germany.

In the south - part of Brabant, Liège, Hainaut, Namur,
- Luxembourg, Belgian schools in the Federal German Republic.

4. MATERIALS SUPPORT

Although both Ministries of Education will only allow books to be used in the schools which have been subjected to inspectors' scrutiny and Ministry approval, this is a reasonable rather than a cramping system of control. A large choice of Belgian and British material is available to teachers and much freedom of choice and adaptation of material is allowed in the classroom provided the teacher is judged to be operating competently. There are two Flemish-based school magazines, English Pages and Talk About, both published by De Sikkel, and the Mary Glasgow learners' magazines are well known. Teachers' magazines such as Modern English Teacher and Practical English Teaching are available in the British Council library and are fairly well known though not widely subscribed to. Other major British and American journals of applied linguistics and language teaching are not read, although some are available in the Council and a few university libraries.

Most schools and universities are reasonably well equipped with hardware, but poorly supplied with software, particularly video-cassettes. Teachers complain of not having their own rooms, as this complicates the use of equipment and drastically reduces visual enrichment by posters, pupils' own work and advertisements. Because of the large expatriate communities, British periodicals, serious and domestic, are readily available in Brussels and in some shops in major cities of Flanders. In country areas and in Wallonia they are less easy to obtain.

5. EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN RELATION TO ENGLISH TEACHING

State education is funded each year through the national budget. Education, organized by other public authorities or by private initiative, functions with subsidies from the State within conditions laid down by law and also with their own means. Subsidies are guaranteed if four main conditions are observed: staff salaries are equal to salaries in state schools; working subsidies are established by contract; equipment subsidies are within the funds laid down in budgetary laws; subsidies for building or furnishings are also within the funds laid down by law. This system of subsidies guarantees parents access to education for their children according to the parents' beliefs. State schools are open to everyone independent of sex, nationality or race and the same applies to private schools, although a number of the latter are still reserved only for girls. In practice, in 1983-4, 70.6 per cent attended free (confessional) schools and 14.3 per cent attended state schools. Foreign children whose parents live in Belgium can be educated under the same conditions as Belgian children. Adaptation courses are organized in primary school for children of immigrants who have been in Belgium for less than three years. Schooling has been compulsory in Belgium since 1919. Since 1983 it has been extended from fourteen to eighteen years of age.

6. DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING OF THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

Full-time schooling is compulsory until fifteen or sixteen years of age, after which part-time schooling on a recognized training course or with a reduced timetable, or in normal full-time schooling is required of pupils until the year in which they reach eighteen. Progress has been made towards co-education which is now usual throughout the state system.

Since 1973 both language communities have been reforming their education pattern to give a more balanced education with less emphasis on academic work and rote-learning and more emphasis on the continuous development of the child with provision for sport, art teaching and music, though the latter are usually available only in the communal conservatoires at evenings and weekends, and sport is usually a voluntary activity on the free Wednesday afternoon.

7. ENGLISH OUTSIDE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

This has been mainly covered under section 1 but mention can also be made of numerous arrangements by which government grants are given to public and private institutions for subsidized language (and many other) classes provided for immigrants, retired people, and the unemployed as part of a city or commune's social services. The director of La Centre d'Animation en Langues, south of Brussels, Mr Jean-Pierre Gailliez, is at present conducting an experiment in teaching English on an early morning rush-hour train from Mons to Brussels. Mr Gailliez is seeking a 'social work' subsidy for this project but, in spite of good public support, has so far failed to obtain it and the teachers are giving their services free for one year. The same energetic director runs an annual language fair in Brussels and for this he has obtained a government grant and the patronage of King Baudouin. In 1985 the fair moves from the commercial exhibition centre at Heysel on the outskirts of Brussels

to the very centre of the city, the former shopping centre known as the 'Galeries Anspach'.

8. BRITISH SUPPORT FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

The British Council supports the activities of the teachers' organizations, collaborates with the English inspectors, provides book exhibitions (promoting British teaching materials), and advises through its resource centre on choice of materials. Such advice is given both to individuals and to institutions. Lectures on ELT and other subjects are given to both students and teachers, as occasions arise. Contact is maintained with university departments of English and applied linguistics.

Specialist visits in the fields of both language and literature are arranged by the Council. Up to two scholarships a year are provided in the ELT field, if there are applicants of an adequate standard, and there are also opportunities for English teachers to go to Britain for shorter study periods.

Though the Council itself does no direct teaching, it now has a wide network of contacts among English teachers in Belgium and is able, to a large extent, to influence standards.

British support for English teaching is required, however, not only at this adult level, but also through the channel of the education system, where much can be done to remedy its limitations by means of collaboration in the fields of both pre-service and in-service training. To this end, British support for work in university departments concerned with the training of teachers of English, for teacher-training colleges' English departments and for the activities of the specialist inspectorates of English in the secondary schools will always prove fruitful.

Although at university level many personal contacts and friendships exist between Belgian university staff in the English departments and British writers and academics, this is an area where British Council assistance in making known younger lecturers and writers is welcomed. Belgians are most hospitable hosts. One has to take account, however, of the very short academic year - the summer term is dominated by examinations from the end of April and the summer vacation stretches from June to late August. September is almost totally committed to administrative tasks. Thus visitors are welcome from October to April, with inevitable pauses for public holidays.

A monthly programme of seminars for secondary school teachers and teachers of adults is held on British Council premises, sometimes conducted by ELO and sometimes by visiting specialists. Attendance varies between thirty and fifty. An upper limit of fifty is normally imposed because of space limitations and the workshop nature of most of the meetings.

An annual gathering of Belgian Anglicists in Higher Education is held in Brussels and in recent years the Council's ELO has been invited to attend and to provide a key-note speaker. In 1983-4 this was Professor Bernard Crick, Orwell's biographer, and in 1984-5 Professor Frank Palmer from the University of Reading speaking on modality. Professor Palmer's lecture was enjoyed not only by the linguists but also by the more numerous senior and traditional teachers of literature who would find an approach to literature through language and discourse analysis foreign in all senses.

Expatriate teachers of English do not exist at all in Belgian schools, except in the international schools, but most of the universities have one British assistant on a contract, sometimes of one year, but renewable, and occasionally longer. In Wallonia there are around a dozen English language assistants in the schools. This system unfortunately does not operate in Flanders as so few English people learn Dutch and would want to take part in such an exchange scheme.

Since, because of competition from the second national language (either French or Dutch), English is by no means invariably taught as the first foreign language, the official provision for its learning must sometimes fail to satisfy the very evident need for a knowledge of this language. Hence there arises a demand (not so much noticed in neighbouring Netherlands, with its one national language) by adults for facilities for learning English both at home and in Britain.

There is a strong branch of the English Speaking Union in Brussels, which organizes annually a public-speaking competition to which schools from all over Belgium send teams. The winners are sent to London to compete in the final round of international competitions there.

In addition to visiting British theatrical companies, touring art exhibitions, musical groups and soloists of international reputation, there are the British Comedy Club, Choral Society, Gilbert and Sullivan Society, Caledonian Society all of which produce shows and concerts which Belgians will attend if invited by British expatriates. The British Churches (Anglican and Presbyterian) hold normal Sunday services in Brussels and there are Belgians in the congregations, usually spouses of British expatriates. A few polyglot circles meet for conversation and joint activities and Lions and Rotary Clubs have mixed memberships. A very rich experience of British society and its pursuits is available to greater Brussels residents, and numerous Belgo-British groups exist in the smaller towns. These groups, although enthusiastic, are usually small with limited audiences and limited funds to attract speakers. Such circles would doubtless welcome increased possibilities through the Council for borrowing feature and documentary films and videos as our resource centre, begun in 1984, gradually builds up.

9. AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

The Americans have a good library in Brussels and are generous in their presentation of books and software to selected recipients in the education system. The Cultural Counsellor, Dr Richard Clifton, is an enthusiastic promoter of his country but not a language teaching specialist. He is, however, a welcome visitor in university departments and is willing to collaborate with the British Council when a suitable opportunity occurs for a joint 'Anglo-Saxon' presentation. Belgians recognize the commercial value of an understanding and command of both varieties of English.

10. OTHER AGENCY SUPPORT

There is no known support from other countries for the teaching of English in Belgium.

11. COMMERCIAL OPPORTUNITIES

There are normal EC marketing outlets for British books, hardware and software.

The Council is an examination centre for GCE, Cambridge language examinations and occasional other British professional examinations on request.

Attempts have been made to offer paid professional advice outside the Council to those seeking detailed information on all levels of education in Britain, but the Council still sees it as part of its function in Belgium to give basic information on the education system.

Increasingly Belgians find British summer and special courses too expensive to attend and, if no subsidy is forthcoming through either internal funding or British Council bursaries and travel grants, they are unable to attend such courses, or indeed send children to Britain on holiday language courses.

12. CREATIVE WRITING

There are regional writers' associations and a PEN club in Belgium.

Poetry festivals abound but two major ones take place biennially in Wallonia and Flanders. The British Council is usually asked to send a poet to each.

A children's competition, initiated by the Vlaamse Club in Brussels and now involving at their insistence all the Embassies and cultural institutes, is also held biennially. Although the Club has a long history of good cultural programmes for adults, the children's competition has so far been poorly run. It is nevertheless a genuine attempt to encourage literary achievement among children and add an international flavour to their efforts. The national winners secure a prize and all national winners' poems are eventually published in a slim volume.

There is considerable publishing in Belgium of Belgian authors, but much is also published in the Netherlands and France and easily imported into Belgium.

The British book trade is also well represented in language books and paperbacks. There is a large branch of W H Smith in Brussels.

13. CURRENT RESEARCH

University libraries vary in their adequacy for students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. The lack of any overall syllabus at any level of Belgian education makes it difficult for the British Council to ensure that all that might be required is available on its own library shelves. A basic British studies stock has to be supplemented with a considerable amount of bibliographical and enquiry work ranging from supplying telephone numbers of counterpart individuals and organizations to detailed bibliographical requests.

There are no known investigations under way at present relevant to the teaching of English language or literature. A group of postgraduate students at the State university at Ghent is preparing a comparative pedagogical grammar of Dutch, French and English. Individual professors and lecturers through their reading and conference-going know their British counterparts reasonably well.

Two one-year scholarships were given to Flemish linguists in the last year. A visitorship enabled the Chairman of the Flemish English Teachers Association to attend the Council's Fiftieth Anniversary ELT Conference in London.

Six grants of smaller sums enabled Belgians to attend computer courses in Lancaster for English language education and research and the Cambridge English Studies Seminar. One was helped during some summer weeks in Cambridge and London to prepare for a PhD thesis. Specialist tourists undertook lecture tours in Belgian institutes of higher education in 1984-5.

14. BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

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15. GENERAL STATEMENT

The complexity of the Belgian political and linguistic scene is reflected in the quadripartite education system: Flanders and Wallonia, Catholic and State. Local authorities and cities also run a number of schools and further education colleges, the latter often arising from private initiative. English is increasing in importance within these systems, but in a mainly two-language country it is also important that the north and south continue to be able to speak to one another if the country is to survive.